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ABSTRACT

Whether the topic is the learning revolution, a learning college for the 21st century, the learning organization, or the growth of franchised learning centers throughout the country, we are in the grip of learning mania. This issue has galvanized higher education to such an extent that suddenly it is unfashionable to mention teaching without immediately adding a reference to learning. Why is this shift happening? After centuries of respect for universities and the professorate, why is the focus now on the learner rather than on the teacher? This paper considers these questions and what they portend for the next generation of teachers--and students--in America's community colleges. The structure of a college must undergo a paradigm shift from the instruction paradigm to the learning paradigm, from being an institution that provides instruction to students to an institution that produces learning in students. This results in several benefits for the college: faculty are the designers of powerful learning environments; curriculum design is based on an analysis of what a student needs to know to function in a complex world; the college is judged not on the quality of the entering class but on the quality of the aggregate learning growth possessed by its graduates; compartmentalized departments are replaced by cross-disciplinary cooperatives; and every employee has a role to play and a contribution to make in maintaining a learner-centered environment. (Contains 18 references.) (VWC)

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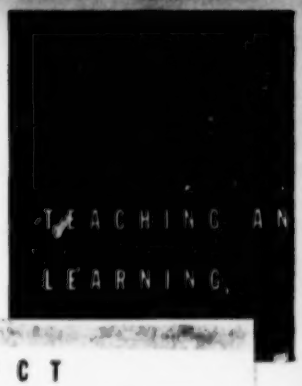

Issues Paper No. 9

The Search for the Learning-Centered College

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ABSTRACT

Whether the topic is the learning revolution, a learning college for the 21st century, the learning organization, or the growth of franchised learning centers throughout the country, we are in the grip of learning mania. No other issue has galvanized higher education to such an extent that suddenly it is unfashionable to mention teaching without immediately adding a reference to learning. Why is this shift happening? After centuries of respect for universities and the professorate, why is the focus now on the learner rather than on the teacher? This paper considers these questions and what they portend for the next generation of teachers—and students—in America's community colleges.

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INTRODUCTION

s Change Needed? Is Change Enough? In 1988, *Building Communities* identified a dual influence on our colleges. The first was the colonial influence with its focus on the student, general education, and loyalty to the college. The second was the German model, with its emphasis on the teacher, specialization, and loyalty to the discipline. This dual influence—some might call it an internal tension—has not abated since American higher education was born at Harvard University. It is all we have ever known. Although many sectors of our society change and adjust to new influences and trends, higher education has been resistant to any meaningful change.

Consider these facts. Our country is going through a significant economic restructuring. Technology has vastly increased the amount of information available to us. The nature of work, jobs, and careers is changing and will never be the same again. The Internet makes knowledge available to us in a way never imagined a few

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years ago. Corporations are moving into the training and education sector. And never before has there been so much public policy debate about accountability in education.

These multiple challenges—pervasive technology, increased calls for accountability, and unprecedented competition—force us to consider what was once an impossible thought: We may forfeit our mandate to provide cost-effective, accessible, undergraduate education. Given the enormous size of our educational system, the sheer scope of change required, and the entrenched forces opposing such change, significant innovations are scattered. What is needed is not only incremental or even institutional change but also transformation. Unless we transform our institutions to be relevant, competitive, accessible, and accountable, we may lose the franchise.

Finding a Metaphor for Institutional Transformation

There are many calls for change and improvement in American education. Much of the impetus for the current discussion on the need for change in undergraduate education comes from an article that appeared in the November/December 1995 issue of *Change*, "From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education." The authors, Robert Barr and John Tagg, both work in the Palomar Community College District in Southern California. Although their backgrounds are in community colleges, the impact of their analysis and vision was felt throughout higher education. A year after the article's publication, Ted Marchese, editor of *Change*, stated in an editorial that the Barr and Tagg article was the most cited in recent history.

Barr and Tagg tapped into a deeply ingrained sense that something had to change. By applying the theories found in the writings of scientist Thomas Kuhn and futurist Joel Barker to the current educational scene, they developed a simple and penetrating analysis of the current state of affairs that they called the instruction paradigm. Stated simply, in their present configuration, our colleges are institutions that provide instruction to students.

What We Are: The Instruction Paradigm

In this paradigm, the focus is on the teacher who usually employs lecture as the primary method of delivering instruction. Learning is clearly the responsibility of the student, and its measurement is not a high priority. This centuries-old model of the scholar possessing knowledge and transferring it to eager students has changed little since the invention of the printing press.

An emphasis on instruction rather than learning is ingrained in the culture and structure of our colleges. For example, in the mid-1990s, Robert Barr investigated the mission statements of virtually every community college in California, 100 or more of which enrolled some 1.5 million students. He concluded that the institutions' mission statements "failed to use the word learning as a statement of purpose."

One central component of the instruction paradigm is that college offerings and organizations are atomistic and compartmentalized. In this metaphor, the atom is the 50-minute lecture period and the molecule is the three-credit course offered in a 15-week semester or a 10-week quarter. In this environment, time is constant and learning varies. Meaningful assessment tends to take place at the conclusion of a course; the entire institution shifts gears as it enters exam week. The degree or certificate awarded recognizes accumulation of credit hours, not a demonstration of interrelated knowledge and skills.

Other characteristics of the instruction paradigm are readily recognizable. Independent, discipline-centered departments are repositories of specialized and somewhat isolated knowledge, rarely interacting with colleague departments. Significant resources

and planning are committed to maintaining traditional values and keeping teachers current in their disciplines through professional development programs. A subtle but perceptible caste system exists on many campuses in which the faculty are the "upper class" and other employees the support staff. To ensure that a teacher has the requisite preparation to convey knowledge, minimum academic qualifications are required in the faculty hiring process. Simply put, any expert can teach.

Despite the significant body of literature on the value of collaborative or self-paced learning environments, the learning community movement, and assessment as a pedagogical tool, we do little to infuse these approaches into our curriculum except on the fringe. We all agree that students present us with multiple learning styles and that critical thinking should be incorporated into every course. Yet there is little concrete evidence that we implement our beliefs or that we practice what we preach. We have been, and remain, teaching institutions. It is the student's responsibility to learn. It has always been so.

What We Must Become: The Learning Paradigm

Barr and Tagg argued that the very mission, vision, culture, and structure of a college must undergo a paradigm shift from the *instruction paradigm* to the *learning paradigm*, from being an institution that provides instruction to students to an institution that produces learning in students. Once that shift is made, everything has the potential for change. This deceptively simple semantic change has profound implications for what our colleges can become and redefines how we design and shape the complex relationship that will exist in the future between the teacher and the student.

This paradigm shift results in several benefits for the college: Faculty are the designers of powerful learning environments. Curriculum design is based on an analysis of what a student needs to know to function in a complex world rather than on what the teacher knows how to teach. The college is judged not on the quality of the entering class but on the quality of the aggregate learning growth possessed by its graduates. Compartmentalized departments are replaced by cross-disciplinary cooperatives. And every employee has a role to play and a contribution to make in maintaining a learner-centered environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Colleges must reconfigure the way they interact with students. Emphasis must shift from delivering instruction in traditional methods to discovering the many ways in which learning can be stimulated in every student. Although lecturing is a valid method of delivering information, encouraging discussion, promoting interaction, and using other collaborative ways to enhance learning must be examined and adopted. Faculty must be trained to become proficient in both stimulating and assessing student learning.**
- **State systems, accreditation bodies, and other regulatory agencies must initiate serious discussion on the continuing validity and practicality of the semester or quarter system as the most effective way to produce student learning. Given the diverse ways in which we can access information today, we must also question the notion that all subjects fit easily into a three- or four-credit-hour modules.**
- **Colleges must redefine what is meant by full-time faculty teaching load to include mentoring, proactive academic advisement, creating and monitoring learning environments, and strategic community involvement. Faculty must be liberated from the tyranny of the Carnegie unit in order to design powerful learning environments that address multiple learning styles and needs.**

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Barriers to Change

Given the nature of our colleges—their history and traditions, their commitment to shared governance and consensus building, and a substantial institutional culture that seems to resist change—the impediments to organizational transformation in our colleges are formidable.

The concept of shared governance implies that all campus constituencies have an active role to play in determining the goals, direction, and operation of the college. No other entity in society embraces this collectivist approach to managing its affairs. But true shared governance is more often honored in the breach than in the observance. Faculty zealously guard the curriculum as their exclusive property, but they selectively determine what role they will play in institutional management decisions on a case-by-case basis, effectively holding a veto over meaningful change. Significant intellectual energy and precious time is committed to positioning and posturing within the campus political climate. Reaching a critical mass of consensus requires long deliberation and consultation. With every hand on the tiller, the collegiate ship of state does not change course easily or often.

Too often, competitive instincts tend to be focused inward on rivalries between or among individuals, departments, divisions, faculty, and administration. Little or no attention is paid to the environment outside the academic community or to potential threats to higher education as a whole. Compartmentalization hinders a process-oriented perspective. Quality is defined as adherence to self-defined standards (accreditation), and there are few meaningful reward systems to recognize initiative, innovation, or efficiency. There are few collegewide discussions on refining and improving the educational process, or on how each employee can contribute to creating a powerful learning environment.

Yet colleges and faculty are prisoners of a system, structure, and history that prevent meaningful collaboration between and among campus stakeholders. Creative, innovative teachers are still held hostage by the Carnegie unit and by the recurring rhythms of the academic year with its long holiday breaks and light summer schedule, as if to say that learning can only take place in certain familiar patterns and at certain times of the year. Archaic and discriminatory grading practices continue, in some cases predefining how letter grades will be distributed in a class without concern for the prior preparation, abilities, or academic potential that individual students possess.

RECOMMENDATION

- **Colleges must utilize their internal communication mechanisms to fully inform faculty and staff of the current external climate and competitive forces, and actively encourage collaborative leadership among all employees in defining how they will reconfigure and position their college for the new century.**

All of us—faculty, administrators, classified staff—are caught up defending a system not of our creation. It is the system in which we were educated. It is the system that annoys or infuriates us when, as parents, we see our children endure some of its inanities. Yet when we are inside it, when we work in it, when we teach in it, we become the system, and amazingly, we resist changing it.

If we could redesign our colleges today by changing their organizational structures, functions, processes, governance, mission, values, the way in which our teachers and students interact, and their individual and unique culture, how many of us would simply duplicate what we have? Would we work together to design the most efficient, effective, and productive organization we could imagine to ensure our future?

This precisely is the challenge America's community colleges face in the new millennium: the need to transform themselves into colleges that place learning first in every

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decision and action. The alternative is to be assimilated or even eradicated by the most powerful competitive forces we have ever known.

Current Approaches to Change

The current literature on institutional change is growing rapidly as more critics weigh in on what is wrong with undergraduate education. There is no more concise statement of what must be addressed and changed than that made by the Wingspread Group on Higher Education (1993):

> Putting learning at the heart of the academic enterprise will mean overhauling the conceptual, procedural, curricular and other architecture of postsecondary education on most campuses.

Terry O'Banion's writings on the traditional limits on higher education (time-bound, place-bound, bureaucracy-bound, and role-bound) echo and expand on the Wingspread Group's view. All four limitations place significant restrictions on the ability to design a learner-centered environment. Indeed, it could be said that Prometheus was not as bound as colleges appear to be today, with restrictions embedded in education codes, procedures manuals, state master plans, legislatively driven budgets, and organizational cultures. Let us look at some of these longstanding limitations in more detail. Each one is a significant barrier to quality teaching and effective student learning.

As K. Patricia Cross (1976) observed, excessive reliance on time- and place-bound instruction defines much of the virtual architecture of our institutions. Studies have clearly shown reliance on time on task to be an invalid measure of learning. Instead, the emphasis should be on measuring mastery. Given the tremendous growth of asynchronous learning opportunities (online courses, virtual colleges and universities, computer-based training, and mediated courses), serious discussion of the continuing validity of the primacy of the semester or quarter system should take place. Equally worthy of debate is the notion that all subjects fit easily into a three- or four-credit-hour module.

Another paradigm needing reexamination is the notion that learning takes place in a specially designed place called a college. In fact, most of our standard classrooms are anything but specially designed and are not the most conducive locations for meaningful learning to occur. Today's student has a choice of accessing information and learning electronically in his or her home at any time by means of the Internet or televised courses. The provider of this educational experience can be the local community college or a college thousands of miles away. What competitive advantages do local colleges have when they require students to battle freeways and confront crammed parking lots in order to sit in crowded lecture halls to acquire the same knowledge? Granted, class discussion and interaction is important and valuable. But which of these two options currently available to the student can be more accurately described as distance learning?

To challenge the classroom is to challenge not only a location, but also those who reside in it. For many faculty, the classroom is a familiar and comforting environment. As William M. Plater (1995) observed:

> The metaphor of the classroom is a powerful one. The most basic and fundamental unit of academic life—the sanctity of the classroom and the authority of the teacher in it—is about to be turned inside out.

Our challenge is to plan and implement, in a sensitive but comprehensive way, the evolving role of faculty in an age where technology has made information accessible in efficient and cost-effective ways, thereby challenging the unique franchise undergraduate education has enjoyed for so long. Readily available access to information

means that the classroom has lost its place of primacy as the central location where knowledge is acquired. This, in turn, forces us to redefine the teacher-student relationship and the traditional geography that houses it.

This is not something to be feared. Technology allows the expansion of instructional design principles and practices, which in turn allows faculty to employ a variety of presentational styles to match multiple learning styles. Institutional resources must be committed to train faculty in how to understand and utilize the new technology in order to design and implement powerful learning environments. The end result could be the liberation of faculty from the tyranny of the traditional academic calendar and a dramatic increase in meaningful student learning.

Another area where the instruction paradigm has impeded us is the way we have institutionalized educational bureaucracy through legislation. New education initiatives are signed into law annually, many of them the product of intense lobbying by special interest education groups including various unions and organizations who define progress as the creation of new jobs or the granting of salary increases. A brief analysis of the current trends outside the traditional education bureaucracy in the K–12 sector is instructive. The popularity of the charter school movement, home schooling, franchised for-profit local learning centers such as Sylvan Learning Systems, and the rapid growth of online educational alternatives are all clear indications that both the public and their elected officials are looking for ways to avoid the educational bureaucracy that is choking traditional institutions.

Publicly funded institutions are increasingly subjected to calls for accountability. They must obtain the results a particular constituency desires, and if they don't, they are deemed to be not accountable and their funding is jeopardized. Legislators are in the vanguard of those calling for increased accountability, yet they regularly attempt to micromanage education, oblivious to the fact that their tampering with the system directly impacts the system's effectiveness and accountability. Our colleges must be careful not to fall into the trap of responding to calls for accountability with hastily developed changes that have no positive systemic impact. The best response is to infuse institutional assessment into the very culture of the college, enabling faculty to accurately and regularly gauge the educational progress of their students and provide administrators with solid data on which to make decisions to improve student learning and institutional effectiveness. However, assessment should not be linked to the negative implications of externally mandated accountability; it should be an internal quest for continuous quality improvement of the learning process conducted by all college employees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Institutional assessment must be incorporated into the very culture of our colleges, enabling faculty to accurately and regularly gauge the educational progress of their students, while administrators have solid data on which to make decisions to improve student learning and institutional effectiveness.**
- **Faculty, in addition to their subject expertise, need to be trained in identifying learning styles, modular curriculum development, and instructional technology and methodology, in order to become effective assessors of a student's abilities and potential, designers of learning environments and systems, and trainers in how to access information and data.**

The New Curriculum

While *Building Communities* urged a strong core curriculum, community colleges must also address the growing needs of a workforce constantly seeking skills upgrades, retraining, and lifelong learning. To effectively serve these student constituencies, community colleges will need to commit resources to prior learning assessment to

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ensure efficient and effective assistance to these students. Adult learners who need to develop new skills or seek retraining to ensure employability find that their needs are not fully met by the traditional core curriculum. In *The End of Work*, Jeremy Rifkin (1995) convincingly argues that rethinking the very nature of work will be the most pressing concern facing society in the coming years. *Building Communities* cited a Department of Labor study indicating that an individual would experience three career changes and seven job changes in his or her lifetime. It is fair to assume that, since the original study was published, the number of job changes in a person's lifetime has increased, and that some of those changes will be to careers that currently do not exist.

The challenge to community colleges, therefore, is to anticipate what the job market will be, and what curricula must be developed to meet the training and retraining needs of the workforce. Colleges must be able to develop and offer courses and programs in a rapid response mode, an operating behavior not usually found on our campuses today. Faculty must be given every opportunity to remain current in their fields, while being allowed to develop new competencies and expertise. And they must become leaders in streamlining the process of developing, approving, and offering courses and programs in a manner that is relevant and responsive to the needs of their constituencies.

Curriculum is most important to faculty. They have a heavy intellectual and emotional investment in the current curriculum. As Lee Knefelkamp observed, it is their "collective autobiography." Because their primary allegiance is to their department or discipline, there is little or no sense of the collective whole, no meaningful comprehension of the overall process of a student's education. Taken collectively, the curriculum is enormous and compartmentalized, tied to its contributing departments. To the student, the curriculum is incoherent and unwieldy, and stands as an impediment to intellectual achievement or academic progress.

What we currently call the core curriculum (or distribution requirements) also needs transformation. This prescribed set of required courses from an array of departments, assembled in the hope that a "well rounded general education" will miraculously occur from what is basically a cafeteria menu, is without design or merit. Coherence, if there is any, is to be supplied by the student. The core curriculum is not learning-centered or outcomes-based. A further complication is that community colleges cannot be innovative in developing a truly effective curricula that contains core knowledge and skills because upper level institutions often dictate the shape and content of general education requirements to meet their own internal political needs. The student is trapped in the academic crossfire.

Competence in life involves the appropriate use of knowledge whereas academic success involves the recognition and recall of knowledge. Students leave our colleges

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Community colleges must anticipate what the future job market will be and what curricula must be developed to meet the training and retraining needs of the workforce. They must find ways to streamline and shorten the cycle of curriculum development, approval, and implementation to be responsive partners in workforce development.**
- **The traditional curriculum will remain a core offering of community colleges; however, the development of competency certification, often in partnership with the private sector, should be a strong alternative to degree or certificate programs.**
- **Faculty must define collectively what graduates should know and be able to do, and design learning experiences to achieve those ends. The curriculum should be designed around the critical learning outcomes necessary for success in work and in life.**

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knowing things, but are unable to understand concepts or apply knowledge across particular contexts, because the curriculum has often failed to focus on competency. The rapid increase for learning on demand will affect the existing curriculum, causing increasing modularization and new methods of delivery. To design a true core curriculum, faculty should define collectively what graduates should know and be able to do, and design learning experiences to achieve those ends. Curriculum should be designed around the critical learning outcomes necessary for success in a field, building the sequence of courses around students actively involved in real-life case studies. A curriculum based on outcomes gives learners the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are valued by employers.

Looking to the Future

The concept of the learning paradigm provides an overarching metaphor for organizational transformation, not merely change. It is not a concept that can be applied to one portion of a college. It must permeate all aspects of its structure, fabric, and culture to effectively complete the paradigm shift. Planning, resource allocation, facilities design, curriculum development, policy governance, the infusion of technology into pedagogy, and the nature and quality of all supportive services must be aligned with the vision of a college unified in causing, enhancing, and producing student learning. Various management tools and organizational development practices can be effectively applied to hasten the transformation, but the tools alone, without vision and commitment, are ultimately insufficient.

When new facilities are constructed or existing facilities are renovated, colleges must abandon the comfortable paradigms of the conventional classroom. Connectivity must be universally present and the ability to connect to the incredible information network of the Internet with the click of a mouse must be available in every facility. Classrooms must be easily reconfigured to permit small group discussion, collaborative learning exercises, and maximum individualized interactions between teacher and student. Faculty should be given appropriate presentational technology to enhance their efforts.

Placing learning at the core of every decision and action means rethinking how we organize ourselves, how we structure our colleges, and how we interact with each other as employees of an institution. Job roles and descriptions must be rethought and modified. Technology must be thoughtfully applied to relieve staff of busy work and meaningless repetitive tasks, freeing them to assume new roles in support of the central learning mission. Above all, a new spirit of mutual trust and cooperation must evolve so the energies of everyone are focused on student learning rather than the preservation of old allegiances, privileges, and mindsets.

As we plan for the colleges of the future, we must anticipate the tremendous societal changes and technological challenges that face us. We need not eliminate the place-bound campuses and locations in which we have invested, but we cannot allow them to continue to function on a part-time or selective basis. We must move from the old agrarian-based calendar to 365-day operation. We must develop a virtual presence to match our community presence to meet the incredible increase in learning on demand. In the process of being a responsive learning institution, both virtually and in reality, we will have to reexamine our employee contracts, our labor agreements, what we mean by full- and part-time

employment, and how we define the responsibilities and privileges of tenure. In an age where information can flow freely across state and national lines, state master plans quickly will be rendered obsolete, district boundaries will be meaningless, and educational sector politics will become moot. We will have a new set of potential colleagues. We already have a powerful new set of competitors.

Maximizing Resources in the Transformative Process

Colleges need to invest in supporting the crucial and evolving role of faculty as subject experts, learning mentors, and role models while adding the new responsibilities of learning environment designer and holistic curriculum leader. Freed from the time- and place-bound curriculum and classroom, the 21st century teacher can have more freedom to experiment with new methods, techniques, and approaches to ensuring that all students learn in whatever manner is most appropriate to the learner.

Another resource to maximize is the tremendous potential of every college employee. Rather than continuing a hierarchical structure in which there are teachers and those who support teaching, we should engage in a dialogue that examines the potential of all our people to be utilized in the most cost-effective and sensible way so they may become active contributors to the learning process.

Indeed, all academic, student services, and administrative personnel need to become involved in the transformation process. Leadership must come from those who have dealt with the internal obstacles and external challenges that will affect higher education's future. The ultimate goal is to become a college where everyone is focused on learning. With learning at the center of the organizational culture, this approach becomes an analytical matrix against which current problems may be evaluated, a target toward which institutional energies and resources may be directed, and a unifying goal that will bring campus constituencies together in common purpose.

Those who develop and manage budgets must have the political courage to allocate resources in a manner consistent with the support of student learning. Academic planners must think outside the instruction paradigm "box" to complement faculty who commit to becoming the designers of learning environments rather than simply maintaining the comfort zone of traditional lecturing. Strategic planning efforts must be free of the restrictive elements of paradigmatic thinking to filter out new information that does not agree with our current direction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **In those areas where new information and knowledge are increasing exponentially, we must develop new ways to allow faculty to remain current in their discipline.**
- **Professional development programs need to integrate all college employees into a core institutional training program so that a common vocabulary, approach, and commitment to student learning is shared by all.**
- **When new facilities are constructed or existing facilities are renovated, the ability to connect to the incredible information network of the Internet must be available in every facility. Classrooms should be easily reconfigured to permit small group discussion, collaborative learning exercises, and maximum individualized interactions between teacher and student.**

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Conclusion

Today, we are a nation of lifelong learners. Kids come to our campuses for community services workshops and seminars that enhance their maturation. Older adults seek enrichment through noncredit programs and activities. Workforce members of all ages come to us for refresher courses, skills upgrades, and retraining. We are evolving as institutions. We are no longer simply technical colleges, no longer merely junior colleges. As technology impacts our lives, our jobs, and our society, and as the very definition of what we call community changes, we will become more than just community colleges. We will become the learning centers of our communities.

This is the agenda for the next century: to move from the comfort of the instruction paradigm to the challenge of the learning paradigm, to retain and enhance the strengths and resources within our colleges while courageously daring to transform what we do for the sake of our students. It will not be easy. As Marcel Proust eloquently stated: "The real act of discovery consists not in finding new lands, but in seeing with new eyes."

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